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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: DVC - ELECTIONS KEY TO POSITIVE CHANGE IN IRAQ

SUMMARY

1. Embassy Muscat held a digital videoconference with Dr. Phebe Marr, Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, on the impact of the Iraqi elections on the future of Iraq. Dr. Marr acknowledged that the elections were flawed and that sectarian issues played a prominent role in their outcome. Nevertheless, she considered the elections a landmark event in Iraqi history that has put the country squarely on the road to democracy. About 20 Omanis participated in the exchange, posing thoughtful -- and thought-provoking -- questions. End summary.

An Important Step

2. On March 28, we hosted a 90-minute digital video conference (DVC) with Dr. Phebe Marr, Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, an independent, nonpartisan institution created by Congress to promote the prevention, management, and peaceful resolution of international conflicts. Dr. Marr addressed 20 Omani interlocutors from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, journalists, magazine editors, and members of the Diplomatic Institute, on the importance of the recent Iraqi elections.

3. Dr. Marr pointed out that before Saddam Hussein's removal Iraq did not have a promising future, but his removal and the subsequent elections have put the country on a better path. She stressed that although the elections were flawed due to an insecure environment and a lack of adequate voter education or party-building, they nevertheless brought a sense of empowerment to the Iraqi people. In addition, she predicted that the electoral victory of sectarian party lists would force the diverse segments of Iraqi society to compromise in order to form a representative government.

Change Won't Come Easily

4. Dr. Marr stressed that Iraq will face challenges such as continued sectarian violence and mistrust, a slow reconstruction process, the ethnic and religious obstacles, and the difficulty of drafting a constitution acceptable to all groups of the society. Dr. Marr argued that the insurgency is not the biggest threat to a democratic Iraq, but is a factor that will delay investment and the return to stability. She also discounted the possibility of civil war, citing the willingness of Sunnis to rejoin the political process and Kurdish acceptance of autonomy within Iraq as signs that key factions have opted to play a role in the new government.

What Do The Neighbors Think?

5. Dr. Marr opined that the Iraqi elections were a strong indication that democracy can take hold in Arab countries. She speculated that Iraq could play a role in spreading greater openness to Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran and Egypt, but acknowledged that these countries would not necessarily welcome this influence. She predicted, however, that they would not seek to destabilize Iraq because an unstable Iraq would not be in their interest. Ms. Marr suggested that the smaller Arab Gulf States would not feel threatened by a democratic Iraq because they have already instituted moderate changes that provide their citizens greater liberty and increased political power.

Answering The Hard Questions

6. Dr. Marr participated in a lively Q&A session following her presentation. In response to a question about U.S. interests in the region, she said the Bush administration is

committed to liberalization and stated her belief that U.S. and coalition forces will depart Iraq when the Iraqi government asks them to do so. She noted the impatience of the American people for the troops' return. In addition, she stated that it is unlikely that the U.S. will use military force to initiate regime change or democratization in Iran or Syria.

17. When asked whether current Iraqi leaders should be viewed as legitimate, Dr. Marr noted, "These people have lived outside of Iraq for a long time. I consider them volunteers who have come to help rebuild their homeland and train a successor generation to take over. I doubt that very many of them will remain in their positions ten years from now." She also rejected a suggestions that Gulf states could deflect U.S. pressure to democratize by establishing or expanding relations with Israel, stating, "While the U.S. wants the countries to have better relations with Israel, the two issues are separate."

18. When asked if the U.S. is pushing for "selective democracy" in the region, Dr. Marr responded that the policy makers in the Bush administration who want democracy are committed to it everywhere. However, she acknowledged that the amount of pressure placed on a country might be influenced by other factors, such as national security interests.

19. Although contacts audience members did not always agree with Dr. Marr's point of view, they appreciated her thoughtful analysis of the situation in Iraq and largely shared her assessment that the elections were a momentous event in Iraqi history. Most agreed with her assessment that it is time to leave disagreements about the war behind and consider ways to rebuild Iraq and help it to advance on the road to democracy.

Getting the Word Out

10. Linking Omanis directly with a respected Iraq expert helped advance our MPP goal of garnering more Omani support for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Iraq. It also enabled us to address the misperceptions that the U.S. will remain in Iraq indefinitely and hopes to install an U.S.-controlled government there. The program's timing during the formation of the new government and prior to the drafting of the new constitution provided an excellent opportunity to call attention to the positive implications of the elections for the future of that country.

BALTIMORE